Ministers of France, Italy and Russia. The French Premier was easy-going and indolent—devoid of initiative. If his genius discerned the right road, his temperament led him to acquiesce in the smoothest. The Italian Premier was an honest man of mediocre gifts. His most powerful colleague—Sonnino—was a strong man, but his strength lay entirely in the region of diplomacy. He had no aptitude for conducting a war. He had no special interest in the fighting branch of the business. As to Russia, it was presided over by a weak autocrat, who was ruled by a temperamental and superstitious wife, and internal troubles were surging round both.

In spite of unpropitious conditions I decided to make a much belated effort to save the Alliance from a repetition of the barren and bloody tragedies of 1915 and 1916. As I am bound, in an honest account of the events in which I took part, to tell the story faithfully, whether it ended in success or in failure, I propose now to relate the fruitless efforts I made to avert the horrors of the Chemin des Dames, Passchendaele, and Caporetto—also my last despairing attempt to postpone, if not save, the collapse of Russia.

2. CONDITIONS OF A SUCCESSFUL OFFENSIVE

The only conditions under which a great offensive operation could hope to succeed had been written in scarlet letters by the events of the War.

It needed no special training or intelligence to read the warnings of past disaster.

The first condition was that the morale of the defending troops should have deteriorated, either because it had been undermined by constant defeat